

Ukraine on the Eve of Parliamentary Elections: Internal trends and Security Implications

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Ukraine's upcoming parliamentary elections in March 2002 will determine not only the new composition of the Ukrainian parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*). They will also define the correlation of forces between the parliament, the president, and the government, the model of the 2004 presidential elections, and the fate of Ukrainian reforms and the geopolitical behavior of the country.

The Election Rules

On October 18, 2001, the Rada adopted a new election law and the president signed it on November 2. President Leonid Kuchma rejected the Rada's five previous election laws and the parliament had been unable to gather a constitutional majority to overcome his veto. A purely proportional system was initially proposed. After this was rejected, a system with party lists accounting for 75 percent of the seats was proposed and again rejected. In the end, the parliament yielded to Kuchma and kept the mixed majoritarian-proportional system introduced in 1998: 225 deputies elected in single-member districts and 225 elected by party lists with a 4 percent electoral hurdle. Additionally, the new electoral law mandated that a party needs to register at least a year before the elections to field candidates and parties that won in previous elections or have factions in parliament are able to participate in district electoral commissions. Another of Kuchma's victories over the Rada in the election law was the shortening of the campaign from 180 days to 90 days. The electoral campaign will formally start on January 1, 2002, and last until the voting day, March 31, 2002. In reality, however, the campaign unofficially began in September 2001 as parties began to forge alliances and wage their struggle in the media.

Players and Chances

The main actors with a chance to pass the 4 percent threshold include:

The Left:

- The **Communists**, according to survey data, can expect their traditional 15–20 percent, which derives mostly from the older generation. The Communists have consistently been a convenient opposition group as Kuchma and his entourage have been able to redirect public anger and resentment toward the Communists by scapegoating them and thus channel hostile public opinion away from Kuchma.
- The left-center **Socialist Party**, led by former Rada speaker Oleksander Moroz, can expect to narrowly meet the 4 percent threshold with about 5 percent of the vote. Moroz has to turn to the traditional left to get votes, but the gulf between Moroz and orthodox Communists continues to widen.

Ideologically Amorphous Propresidential Center:

- The bloc **For United Ukraine**, which now consists of five parties: the People's Democratic Party (administrative nomenklatura), Labor Ukraine (a loose formation of financial and industrial tycoons), Party of Regions (mainly a political representation of Donetsk-based mining and metallurgy syndicates), Agrarian Party (the agrarian administrative corps and heads of big agrarian enterprises), and Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (directors of large industrial plants and medium-size businesses associated with them). Together with SDPU (u), these parties form the "oligarch layer." They declared unconditional support for Kuchma and their share of the vote has been predicted to fall between 4 and 9 percent.
- **Social Democratic Party of Ukraine** (United)—SDPU (u). The party is "social-democratic" only in name. Business tycoons Hryhoriy Surkis and vice-speaker Viktor Medvedchuk control it. Its current support level is around 4 percent. On December 13 Medvedchuk was dismissed as the Rada's first vice-speaker by the combined vote of the Left and Center-Right.
- The **Green party** could gain up to 5 percent, mostly because of its attractive title. Several banking groups also support it.

Center-Right

- Yuri Yushchenko's block **Our Ukraine** includes parties of national-democratic orientation that supported ex-premier Yushchenko during his tenure, including both branches of *Rukh* (Movement) and *Reforms and Order*. These three parties promised to unite after the elections. Mavericks from other blocs as well as most of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine have joined them. Due to Yushchenko's high personal rating, this bloc is expected to gain 15–17 percent of the vote; it optimistically hopes for up to 25 percent.
 - **Yulia Tymoshenko's block** may gain up to 5 percent of the vote. It includes her party "*Bat'kivshchyna*" (Fatherland) along with the right-wing remnants of the anti-Kuchma Forum of National Salvation. Moderate members of the FNS joined the Yushchenko bloc.
- Apart from these leading contenders, several other parties will be trying to overcome the 4 percent threshold:
- An ultraleft populist **Progressive Socialist party**, led by Natalia Vitrenko, helped propresidential forces split the left camp in previous elections and take votes from Moroz (whom Kuchma considered his most dangerous rival).

Structures from the ideologically amorphous and propresidential center include:

- The **Democratic Union** party, which solicited ex-security council secretary Volodymyr Horbulin to be head of its list.
- The eccentric libertarian party **Yabluko** (Apple), which tries to exploit the topics of excessive taxation and scandalous, arrogant campaigning.
- Kyiv city mayor Oleksander Omelchenko heads the block **Unity**. Omelchenko plans to use his reputation as an effective mayor and the administrative means of the Association of Cities that he heads. According to polls, Unity so far fails to surpass the threshold.
- The so-called **People's Rukh for Unity** proclaimed itself, with the encouragement of Yushchenko's rivals, to be a successor of the united People's Rukh of the early 1990s (despite the protests of two main branches of Rukh that joined Yushchenko's block).
- **Women for Future**, allegedly supported by Kuchma's wife, actively promotes itself using charity and local-level projects as a means to demonstrate its ability to "help people".
- A group of well-to-do businessmen and politicians, with support from the presidential entourage, plans to create a "new liberal movement" and to gain the votes of those dissatisfied by existing parties but more or less content with a market economy and Ukrainian statehood.

Up to 25 percent of the population remain undecided as to their preferences, and about 30 percent do not trust any existing political party. There is, then, considerable political space in which these parties can maneuver.

Electoral Risks

There is a real risk that several factors will taint the upcoming elections, including, most prominently:

I. Underdevelopment of the party system and the concentration of real decisionmaking within the closed circle of the president's entourage.

Parliamentary elections are traditionally less prone to administrative irregularities than presidential elections. Yet, the "parties of power" still rely on the "administrative resource," and the main actors enjoy constant attention from the president's administration. Volodymyr Lytvyn, the head of the administration, is to become the head of the For United Ukraine list and Prime Minister Anatoli Kinakh is also to occupy a high position on the bloc's list. Yushchenko's bloc also received candidates from Kuchma's administration, including the former deputy head of the president's administration, Yuri Yekhanurov, and the president's representative in parliament, Roman Bessmertny. Although both politicians are on good terms (both professionally and personally) with Yushchenko, they are also personally loyal to the president.

II. Unbalanced influence on Ukrainian society from external sources.

Oligarchs control most of the major private newspapers in Ukraine, with only a few encouraging exceptions. Oligarchs or Russian capital control most TV channels (although several influential channels initially started with the participation of Western capital). The "tapegate" scandal and the struggle between "parties of power," however, provided additional opportunities for the Ukrainian media to secure relatively balanced coverage of the events.

Outside, mainly Russian, PR specialists are actively engaged in this electoral campaign. For United Ukraine invited the Russian image company “Nikkolo M” to work for them, the SDPU(u) enjoys the services of Russian president Vladimir Putin’s image-maker Gleb Pavlovski, and several other PR specialists work with a number of other parties and blocs.

The formal justification for inviting Russian PR specialists to help with a campaign is their practical knowledge (with its 89 federation units, Russia undergoes elections year-round). Yet, to a considerable extent, the business ties of Ukrainian tycoons, their acquaintance with “new methods” of campaigning, as well as their personal acquaintance with Russian PR specialists, dictated this choice and may diminish the access of similar Ukrainian institutions to decisionmakers.

Possible Scenarios

A victory for the oligarch parties will lead to the continuation of present undefined policies. Given a stronger Russian presence in Ukrainian politics and economy and limited chances to repay the gas debts Ukraine owes Russia without radical economic reform, Ukraine will likely fall into further economic dependence on Russia and could eventually coordinate foreign and security issues with it. This scenario requires a long-term strategy from Russia. If Russian tycoons infringe on the economic interests of their Ukrainian counterparts, the latter will likely switch to a Ukraine-centered policy. So far, Putin’s Russia has demonstrated the ability to deal with Ukraine cautiously, so the “economic russification” scenario is indeed plausible.

However, if Our Ukraine garners up to 20 percent of the vote, it will be able to form a coalition with factions of other reform-minded blocs (for instance, the mavericks from For United Ukraine, which is too loose to remain solid; majoritarian deputies; and new parties that are psychologically closer to the liberal reforms approach). In this case, the oligarchs will have to consider Our Ukraine a formidable force and negotiate a coalition government, possibly a reform-oriented coalition at that, with support from the parliamentary majority, which has not yet happened since Ukrainian independence. A significant stumbling block to this scenario is that it requires the national democrats to negotiate and reach compromises among them and with the like-minded from other parties.

Thus, the first scenario remains one of the possible options. This puts forward a long-term task for European- and liberal-minded groups, parties, and NGOs in Ukraine, with possible support from Western organizations: to develop a system of counterinfluence, promote democratic standards, and prepare a new generation of decisionmakers. This should include university-, media-, and NGO- oriented programs that would allow the creation of a network of opinion-building and educational centers, which would provide both the public and decisionmakers with feasible prodemocratic and pro-European alternatives.